

Communication Patterns of Military Couples During the Post-Deployment Transition

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Rationale

The transition from deployment to reintegration is a challenging time for military couples. Although service members and their romantic partners are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and relationship distress during the transition, some military couples are able to thrive in the midst of the upheaval. The goal of our project was to document the communication patterns that are satisfying and dissatisfying for military couples during the six months following reunion after deployment.

Method and Sample

We conducted an online questionnaire study to identify the communication issues and challenges that arise during the post-deployment transition. The study, conducted from January to March 2010, involved 259 participants ($n = 111$ males, 148 females) living in 33 states who had been reunited with their romantic partner within the past six months. 44% were service members from all branches of the military, 9% were part of a dual-career military couple, and 47% were at-home partners of a service member. Service members were affiliated with the U.S. National Guard (59%), the Army (32%), the Marines (4%), the Air Force (3%), and the Navy (2%). Participants received a \$15 gift card from Target or Walmart for completing a 30-minute questionnaire.

Noteworthy Findings

Participants identified a number of (i) changes to their relationship, (ii) relationship issues they are uncertain about, and (iii) ways their partner interferes with their everyday activities (see Table 1 for the list of themes and examples). These themes suggest that difficulty communicating, trust issues, and problems redistributing control are major challenges facing military couples upon reunion.

The data also revealed that individuals were dissatisfied with their relationship when they were experiencing uncertainty about their relationship or when their partner was interfering with their everyday routines. In terms of communication, people were satisfied with their relationship when they (i) gave their partner *assurances* of continued commitment to the relationship, (ii) communicated with *openness* about the nature of the relationship, and (iii) engaged in *constructive conflict management* behaviors.

Taken together, these findings suggest two guidelines for returning warriors and their partners who want to promote relational well-being during the transition. First, military couples should take steps to reduce uncertainty about their relationship and interference from their partner. Second, military couples should commit themselves to communicating using assurances, openness, and constructive conflict management behaviors.

Future Research

The next step in this program of research is to track military couples experiencing the transition over time. We have secured a seed grant from the Family Resiliency Center at the University of Illinois to conduct an online survey of military couples once per month for the first three consecutive months after reunion.

Data collection is scheduled to begin in October of 2010 and to conclude when 100 couples have completed all three questionnaires. Couples will be recruited by circulating announcements to family readiness officers, chaplains, and military personnel in the state of Illinois and across the country. Gift cards will be offered as an incentive for participation.

We welcome any comments you have about our research or any ideas you have about recruiting participants for the upcoming study. Please contact Dr. Leanne Knobloch at knobl@illinois.edu or Dr. Jennifer Theiss at jtheiss@rutgers.edu.

Table 1: Challenges Reported by Service Members and Partners During the Transition

Changes to the Relationship: In what ways, if any, did your relationship change after deployment compared to before deployment?

1. *Difficulty communicating:* distance between spouses, feeling closed off, problems sharing feelings
2. *Conflict:* anger, hostility, increased conflict, fighting, volatility
3. *Parenting problems:* feeling disconnected from children, difficulty disciplining, expecting children to follow orders, interacting with children as if they are military personnel, not knowing how to parent
4. *Integrating service members into daily life:* difficulty understanding or accommodating new needs
5. *Managing household activities:* changing roles for chores, new schedules, disrupted routines
6. *Considering divorce:* seeking counseling, contemplating divorce, trial separation

Uncertainty about Relationships: Please list and briefly describe issues of uncertainty you experienced (a) during deployment, and (b) since you have been reunited after deployment.

1. *Personality changes:* Is my partner a different person? Do we need to reacquaint ourselves again?
2. *Lack of connection:* Will the relationship survive? Is counseling needed? Did we grow apart?
3. *Trust and faithfulness:* Did my partner cheat during deployment? Is my partner lying about how he or she spent time?
4. *Communication:* Why do I feel out of the loop? Am I nagging too much? Why is he or she withholding information? How can I regain some privacy? Am I sharing too much or too little about the time apart?
5. *Service member's health:* Did he or she kill anyone? Is he or she depressed, anxious, or suicidal?
6. *Parenting issues:* How do I regain my connection with the children? Why don't the kids listen to me?

Interference from Partners: Please list and briefly describe ways in which your partner has made it harder for you to complete your everyday activities since you have been reunited after deployment.

1. *Control issues:* partner is bossy or critical, problems sharing decisions, hard to give up independence
 2. *Household chores:* partner is lazy or not doing fair share, harder to get chores done, more mess
 3. *Parenting:* undermining each other's discipline, not spending enough time with the kids, unsure how to care for them, getting in the way of the children's routines, trouble meshing with the children's schedule
 4. *Social life:* service member spending too much time with military friends, too busy with other activities
 5. *Feeling smothered:* lack of private time, partner wants all my attention, partner is clingy or needy
 6. *Communication problems:* partner won't open up, partner doesn't understand, arguing, conflict
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